The Case for P-16 Education in Tennessee

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The Tennessee education system needs both a common voice and consistent plan to make progress and gain political support.

It is often said that luck is when preparation meets opportunity. If this is so then Tennessee cannot bank on luck to implement P-16 education. The state of education in Tennessee shows very few signs of financial preparation and the state's perennial budget predicament does not seem to offer much opportunity. Ironically, however, the lack of preparation to guide the state's schools and colleges along with the budget turmoil actually creates just the right environment for P-16 reform.

The framework created by aligning all levels of education forces policy-makers and policy-implementers to consider the implications of their goals, practices, and results on the entire education pipeline. This new lens clarifies issues and offers a setting for consensus on contentious initiatives, such as standardized testing, remedial and developmental courses, improved teacher training, and shared information. The Tennessee education system needs both a common voice and consistent plan to make progress and gain political support.

State of Education in Tennessee

Times are tough in Tennessee these days. The current state budget crisis both draws attention to lack of funding for education and takes attention away from the larger crisis facing the state—the education of its citizenry. Tennessee's fiscal situation brings all state budgets under scrutiny and creates the possibility for education to take the spotlight at any time. It is no secret that Tennessee public schools and higher education institutions face formidable challenges. State politicians, education leaders, and the media all recognize and report what has now become the unalarming grim reality of education in Tennessee.

For the K-12 system, Tennessee public schools rank 44th in the nation and next to last in the southeast in expenditures per pupil. Commensurate with the funding, Tennessee's achievement scores are in the cellar as well. The state ACT average score is more than one point below the national average of 21 and, among a few neighboring states, Tennessee ranks below Alabama, Arkansas, and West Virginia. The 4th and 8th grade basic skills tests in reading and mathematics yield similarly disappointing results with Tennessee lagging significantly behind national averages and faring among the worse in the southeast (SREB 2000). The low reading scores may be explained by the fact that Tennessee is the only state in the southeast without a reading initiative. Although money is not the panacea, it appears that Tennessee's financially under-served students are suffering in the classroom as well.

Trends in State and Local General Operating Appropriations[1] Per Full-Time at Public Colleges and Universities[2] (adjusted for inflation)

	Four-Year Colleges and Universities			
	1994-95	1999-2000	Change	Change
SREB states	$5,997	$6,037	$40	0.7
Alabama	5,777	4,871	-906	-15.7
Arkansas	5,451	5,618	167	3.1
Delaware	--	5,503	--	--
Florida	7,869	7,520	-349	-4.4
Georgia	6,427	7,562	1,135	17.7
Kentucky	5,083	5,025	-58	-1.1
Louisiana	3,908	3,803	-105	-2.7
Maryland	7,217	7,054	-163	-2.3
Mississippi	5,652	6,321	669	11.8
North Carolina	7,836	7,862	26	0.3
Oklahoma	4,753	5,204	451	9.5
South Carolina	5,498	5,367	-131	-2.4
Tennessee	6,633	5,330	-1,303	-19.6
Texas	6,261	6,133	-128	-2.0
Virginia	4,707	5,766	1,059	22.5
West Virginia	4,188	3,954	-234	-5.6

Not to be outdone by the K-12 system, Tennessee's higher education institutions have seen their appropriations decrease by nearly 20% in the last five years, which is far and away the largest decrease in the southeast. This poor funding situation is exacerbated by the need for remedial or developmental coursework by more than half of the

enrolled students, which presumably affects the dismal persistence-to-graduation rates—47% at public universities and 23% at public two-year institutions (THEC 2001). Persistence and remediation rates aside, higher education's most striking statistic is the often-quoted 17.7% of Tennessee residents who have a bachelor's degree or higher compared to the national average of 25.2%. In addition to drawing attention to the importance of higher education, this figure serves as a reality check for Tennessee's education goals and its current condition.

The good news is that both K-12 and higher education master plans call for P-16 collaboration to guide their systems. Granted, master plan documents are not always the best indication of what is actually happening at the schools and colleges, however, at least their leaders recognize the need for alignment between all Tennessee schools. The K-12 *Master Plan for Tennessee Schools 2001* identifies nine key initiatives, including four that directly involve P-16 issues: 1) early childhood education; 2) teacher education and professional growth; 3) accountability and assessment; and, 4) school leadership and school-based decision making (SBE 2001). The *Statewide Master Plan for Tennessee Higher Education 2000-2005* also identifies nine goals, one of which specifically identifies the need for P-16 reform, "Offer relevant educational programs that address economic, intellectual, and social problems by partnering with business, government, and P-12 and other educational institutions" (THEC 1999). These explicit references to P-16 education in master plan documents open the door for significant educational alignment and, hopefully, for increased attention and resources dedicated to education at all levels.

The turbulent times in Tennessee provide a setting that is ripe for large-scale education reform. As evidenced by many scholars and policy-makers, transition periods or crises are often the best time to bring education to the forefront of the political agenda. The current budget situation and upcoming elections set the stage for education advocates to illustrate the significant role education can play in addressing Tennessee's challenges. In fact, the ability to frame the education debate may decide the outcome of the 2002 elections and, more importantly, may set the education agenda for the coming decades.

Percentage of Population 25 or Older with a Bachelor's Degree (U.S. Census, Current Population Survey)

	1990	1995	1999
United States	**20.3%**	**23.0%**	**25.2%**
SREB States (weighted)	18.6%	19.9%	23.3%
Alabama	15.7%	17.3%	21.8%
Arkansas	13.3%	14.2%	17.3%
Delaware	21.4%	22.9%	24.0%
Florida	18.3%	22.1%	21.6%
Georgia	19.6%	22.7%	21.5%
Kentucky	13.6%	19.3%	19.8%
Louisiana	16.1%	20.1%	20.7%
Maryland	26.5%	26.4%	34.7%
Mississippi	14.7%	17.6%	19.2%
North Carolina	17.4%	20.6%	23.9%
Oklahoma	17.8%	19.1%	23.7%
South Carolina	16.6%	18.2%	20.9%
Tennessee	**16.0%**	**17.8%**	**17.7%**
Texas	20.3%	22.0%	24.4%
Virginia	24.5%	26.0%	31.6%
West Virginia	12.3%	12.7%	17.9%

Benefits of P-16 Education

With P-16 initiatives underway in 28 states, educational alignment has been identified as a major priority and serves as a framework encompassing the hot issues in early childhood education, elementary and secondary education, and higher education. As with most reform movements implemented in a wide range of settings, P-16 education takes the shape of the specific priorities of each state. However, two goals remain constant: 1) moving students smoothly from one education level to the next; and, 2) enhancing teacher preparation (ECS 2001).

P-16 education leads to success in student performance, teacher quality, and curriculum alignment.

The literature shows evidence of success in many states in the areas of student performance, teacher quality, and curriculum alignment. To be sure, these three areas do not encapsulate the benefits of P-16 education; however, to be successful a P-16 initiative must have elements of these areas.

The focus of every education policy at its core should translate into improvements or benefits for the students. P-16 education does this by focusing on the transitions from one level to the next seeking to ensure that "no child is left behind." Georgia's P-16 initiative specifically targeted students whose

economic and educational backgrounds suggest that they might be "at risk." Postsecondary Readiness Enrichment Program (PREP) provides additional services (e.g., academic readiness skills, after-school activities, leadership development, self-esteem building, and career exploration) to these students in grades 7-12 (Tafel & Eberhart 1999). This program seeks to improve student performance by giving attention to lowest-performing students in an effort to bring all students to a baseline standard. An alternate approach is to raise student performance expectations as illustrated in Ohio's K-16 initiative.

"Common Expectations" were developed in six disciplines to set the bar for what all students should know upon graduating high school and to adequately prepare them for higher education. Once established, appropriate assessments for measuring achievement were developed and linked directly to higher education admissions, which make students feel that they have a stake in the tests (Tafel & Eberhart 1999). By tying their scores to higher education admissions, high performing students are forced to take the tests seriously, moderate to low performing students may recognize that they are better prepared for postsecondary education than they thought, and the lowest performing students at least have an appropriate assessment of what has been taught with tangible links to practical life and career skills.

NCTAF Principles of Teacher Quality

1. The University System will guarantee the quality of any teacher it graduates.
2. The University System will guarantee that all of its graduates in early childhood education can demonstrate accomplishment in teaching children to read and to do mathematics.
3. Graduate programs for teachers will adhere to the general principles of the National Board for Professional Teaching Standards.
4. The University System will assure that graduates of its programs for school leaders and counselors are able to create learning environments that support teacher success in bringing students from diverse groups to high levels of learning.
5. Teacher preparation programs will be the shared responsibility of education faculty, arts and science faculty, and classroom teachers in the schools.
6. Through partnerships with P-12 schools, universities that prepare teachers will have an ongoing responsibility to collaborate with schools in mentoring, induction, and professional development programs for classroom teachers and school leaders.
7. All teacher preparation programs will implement aggressive recruitment policies to increase the numbers, to raise the caliber, and to expand the diversity of teacher candidates, and to balance supply and demand.
8. The University System will expand the number of teacher certification programs offered to individuals who already hold bachelors' degrees from accredited colleges in order to increase opportunities for individuals seeking second careers in teaching.
9. The University System will work with the Department of Education and the Professional Standards Commission to bring an end to out-of-field teaching in Georgia.
10. The University System will encourage institutions that prepare teachers to give added emphasis to policies that support the efforts of faculty to model effective teaching, to focus their research on ways to improve classroom teaching and student learning within P-12 schools, and to support increased participation of teacher preparation faculty in the public schools.

The next major area of focus is teacher preparation, which most states recognize as a necessary step in any serious educational reform. Again, Georgia serves as a good example beginning with their creation of a P-16 Teachers and Teacher Education Sub-Committee to assess the necessary changes to improve teacher quality. This concentrated focus led to a partnership with the National Commission on Teaching and America's Future (NCTAF), which helped define the recommendations ultimately leading to the implementation of 10 principles regarding teacher quality (*Making the Commitment* 1998).

These principles provide the necessary framework to assure teacher quality by setting standards for teacher education programs, facilitating collaboration with universities and P-12 schools, and offering alternative teaching certification. By so doing, the state validated that all certified teachers have the knowledge and skills necessary to improve performance of all students.

Maryland established a similar working group—Teacher Education Task Force—in 1995 to report on the future for education of all teachers. The task force's report outlined six recommendations:

1. Strengthening the undergraduate preparation of teachers with an increased emphasis on providing a solid foundation in academic disciplines.
2. Providing school-based professional training in professional development schools.
3. Offering multiple paths to teacher certification.
4. Linking teacher training with school priorities and reform initiatives.
5. Re-examining teacher certification and licensing policies.
6. Developing accountability and assessment throughout teacher education programs and the continuing professional development of teachers.

Like Georgia's principles, Maryland's recommendations include accountability measures,

collaboration, and alternative teacher certification, but Maryland also identified professional development for teachers already in the system. It appears that the professional development came as a result of not only the ongoing efforts to "professionalize" teaching, but also from the business community's involvement (Zimpher 1999).

The final area of focus—curriculum alignment—is arguably the most defining element of P-16 education by creating the seamless transition that many scholars and practitioners recognize as essential. While curriculum alignment is important between all levels of education, the most recognizable transition is from high school to college. This issue is becoming increasingly important as remedial and developmental classes are coming under scrutiny. As P-16 education brings more attention to the challenges of the K-12 to higher education transition, perhaps alternative educational opportunities will be developed to meet the needs of all students.

The importance of curriculum alignment is best outlined in a RAND study of alignment in California. The authors identify three major aspects of alignment's importance: 1) content and format of test items send messages to students who take them; 2) consistency of rank order or classification of students into categories or programs; and, 3) standards used for decision making must be comparable across assessments (Le, Hamilton, &Robyn 2000). Each of these aspects raise respective concerns about the alternative to proper alignment and make the case for creating assessments that not only bridge K-12 and higher education, but that hold real implications for the students taking the tests.

Michael Kirst further draws attention to the implications of assessments in researching the "remediation gap" by pointing out alarming statistics. For example, in the California State University system 47% of freshmen take remedial English, and 54% take remedial math. Kirst argues that these percentages can come down significantly if universities would tie admissions to appropriately developed high school assessments. Specifically, he recommends that subject-matter-based external exams be recognized by universities for placement, that high school accreditation be revived to ensure consistent GPAs, that the media and policymakers be informed about freshman performance from specific high schools, and that university outreach programs to the underserved be evaluated (Kirst 1998). Some of these recommendations, if not all of them, raise significant turf issues for K-12 and higher education; however, without real collaboration P-16 initiatives cannot succeed. Curriculum alignment is the first step to test the commitment level of all the stakeholders. If the commitment is present in both K-12 and higher education, then the benefits of curriculum alignment can soon translate into benefits of teacher quality and student performance.

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P-16 Education in Tennessee

Given the state of education in Tennessee and the clear benefits of a P-16 system, this reform package provides the state with an opportunity to address many major education issues at once. The environment is ripe for education to become a spotlight issue and P-16 education offers a comprehensive plan to put Tennessee on the right track.

With the election cycle beginning, education is sure to be one of the key issues, but not the focal point, which it appears to be reserved for the income tax debate. By education not playing the lead role, the issue has the potential to unify rather than divide and be shaped in a manner that is not party specific. This setting allows P-16 education to reap the benefits of the chaos surrounding it.

While the 2002 election cycle, particularly the gubernatorial race, present the opportunity for change in party control, it is doubtful that partisan change will matter as much as the level to which individual candidates engage the public on education matters. Additionally, increased polling, may aid their effort by clarifying public opinion and, hopefully, reporting that Tennesseans are less complacent than it appears.

In addition to political motivations, the private sector has good reason to support P-16 education. One piece of anecdotal evidence offered at a recent P-16 Council meeting is that of Tennessee's Nissan plant which moved much of its operation to Mississippi because they felt that the plant had maximized the skilled labor supply in middle Tennessee. This example is significant for two reasons: 1) it illustrates the economic consequences of poor education; and, 2) it compares Tennessee to neighboring states. The economic consequences are felt not only by individuals and families, but also by corporations. For this reason, the P-16 collaboration is sure to include members from the private sector. In fact, the initial funding is entirely from private sources through Tennessee Tomorrow, a Bell South non-profit foundation. The second reason offers a clear picture of Tennessee's education within the southeast region. By comparing our state to Mississippi, Alabama, and West Virginia with Tennessee coming up short, hopefully, policy-makers and the general public will become dissatisfied with the status quo and initiate reform.

The window of opportunity is slowly opening, but is sure to close quickly, so policy-makers must stand ready to take advantage of it. For P-16 education to succeed collaboration, commitment, and trust must be present at all education levels. The problem (state of education in Tennessee) and policies (benefits of P-16 education) are easily defined and offer little room for debate among education policy-makers, however, the politics of education presents the largest hurdle. Overcoming this challenge will require compromise to see the bigger picture of education outside of the familiar lenses of either K-12 education or higher education. Success will also require courage to make decisions that may not be popular with an education level's stakeholders. P-16 education means that K-12 leaders may need to advocate for alternative teacher certification and that higher education institutions recognize the importance of considering state assessments in addition to (or rather than) the SAT and ACT. These are tough stands to make, but the future of Tennessee demands them.

Tennessee has the framework in place with all the stakeholders sitting around the same table in the P-16 Council. With luck sufficiently ruled out as a reform strategy, Tennessee's education leaders must make the most out of the current situation, which presents surprisingly favorable possibilities.

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